



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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lupker@uwo.ca

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seligman@uwo.ca

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26 October 2021

Matthew Letts, PhD
Professor and Dean
Faculty of Arts and Science
University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, AB T1K 3M4

Dear Dr Letts,

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and the merit principle in higher education. (For further information, see our website at www.safs.ca.)

SAFS is concerned that your actions with regard to Paul Viminitz, a professor of philosophy at the University of Lethbridge, constitute a violation of Dr Viminitz's academic freedom and threaten to degrade the academic ethos and mission of your university.

In your letter to Dr Viminitz of 12 October, you record that Dr Viminitz mentioned the word "nigger" in a Philosophy 2001 lecture on 28 September of this year, that Dr Viminitz was in eye-contact with his students during the time he was speaking, and that one of the students in the class was Black.

These are the facts of the matter and no one disputes them. On the basis of these facts, and these facts alone, though, you concluded that it is possible that Dr Viminitz wrongfully discriminated against one of his students.

Dr Viminitz is not alleged to have slandered anyone or to have bullied a student, or to have done anything at all meant to demean or belittle another. As you know, that a student dislikes or is made uncomfortable by something a professor (or classmate) says in discussing a matter at hand is not grounds for alleging disrespectful or wrongfully discriminatory behaviour, not even should the student claim to have been harmed by what he or she heard.

One would expect that as a senior academic administrator at Lethbridge, your response to the student complaint would be to talk to the student and explain to him or her the nature of academic inquiry and discussion and to assure them that Dr Viminitz did nothing wrong in speaking the word as he did.

Your assertion that the facts of the case provide reasonable cause to ask whether Dr Viminitz should be reprimanded violates Dr Viminitz's academic freedom to teach as he feels fit. Professors do well to communicate with their students directly and candidly, without recourse to euphemism or indirection. Had Dr Viminitz substituted a formula such as "the n-word," he would have then been treating his students disrespectfully. He would have conveyed to them that he considers them less than competent to engage in serious discussion of an important matter.

Were you to call an investigation, that investigation, if properly conducted, would show Dr Viminitz well within his rights as a teacher to treat his students with respect by speaking to them frankly. Nonetheless, were an investigation called, professors at Lethbridge might well be intimidated into self-censorship and insincerity. Some might belittle their students by speaking to them euphemistically and some might avoid considering certain views in the classroom or even certain topics, knowing that open and free discussion with their students puts them at risk of censure by their academic administrators. The silencing effect such an investigation would have on students would certainly be even worse.

We respectfully request that you respond to our letter. With your permission, we will post your response along with this letter on our website.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Mercer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Mark Mercer, PhD
President, Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS)
1801 Chestnut Street
Halifax, NS B3H 3T7
president@safs.ca
<http://www.safs.ca/>
Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/safs.ca/>

Professor of Philosophy
Halifax, Nova Scotia
sergechestnut@gmail.com
<http://professormarkmercer.ca/>

Cc. Paul Viminitz, Department of Philosophy